CARNEGIE
ENDOWMENT FOR
INTERNATIONAL PEACE

OCTOBER 2024

Cooperation Between China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia: Current and Potential Future Threats to America

Christopher S. Chivvis and Jack Keating

Cooperation Between China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia: Current and Potential Future Threats to America

Christopher S. Chivvis and Jack Keating

© 2024 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

Carnegie does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Please direct inquiries to:

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036
P: + 1 202 483 7600
F: + 1 202 483 1840
CarnegieEndowment.org

This publication can be downloaded at no cost at CarnegieEndowment.org.

Contents

Introduction 1

Cooperation in Pairs So Far 2

Drawn Together by Common Threat Perception 11

Current Threats 12

Potential Threats 13

China as the Core of an Effective U.S. Strategy 15

About the Authors 17

Notes 19

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 27

Introduction

The structure of world politics is evolving in ways that challenge American global power more than at any time since the end of the Cold War. The United States now faces risks to its interests across East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. To make matters worse, China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are increasing their support for one another. Historical precedents from the 1930s and the early Cold War suggest that even deeper cooperation among them is possible and that a more coherent bloc determined to blunt and roll back U.S. power worldwide might develop.[1] Political leaders as varied as former House of Representatives majority leader Steny Hoyer,[2] Senator Jeanne Shaheen,[3] and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell[4] have thus warned of a powerful new anti-U.S. axis on the rise. How likely is this scenario?

This paper examines the state of cooperation between China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, and identifies paths that could lead to their closer cooperation—and paths that would not. There is no question that each one of these states threatens U.S. interests. Their current cooperation deserves the attention of U.S. policymakers and intelligence analysts—especially when it comes to their support to Russia in its war on Ukraine and the potential proliferation of military technology.

Nevertheless, these states still pose threats largely independent of one another. They are far from a coherent bloc against which the United States could or should orient an effective strategy. They share nothing like the military ties, diplomatic structure, and economic cooperation that existed among the Warsaw Pact countries during the Cold War, for example.

They are very far from enjoying the level of political, economic, diplomatic, and technological cooperation that exists between the United States and its allies and partners. Meaningful cooperation between these four states, moreover, has so far been largely restricted to support for Russia's war effort.

U.S. policymakers therefore need to monitor the signs of deepening cooperation between them,[5] but they should also be careful not to overstate the group's coherence and thereby encourage them to solidify into a real bloc. To the contrary, the aim of U.S. policy should be to divide them. Just as the United States managed to split China and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and thus destroy the myth of "monolithic communism," today it should aim to split this group and thereby defuse the threat that it could pose.

Improving the United States' relationship with China offers the best hope at doing so. This will be difficult, but China is not only the central player in this group of U.S. adversaries, it is also the player that makes the group strategically relevant in the first place. Without China, the importance of the other three would not be all that different from a decade ago. Russia would be creating problems in Europe, North Korea carrying out provocations in East Asia, and Iran challenging U.S. and Israeli power in the Middle East. The depth and importance of the group's future cooperation will therefore turn on Beijing's willingness to lead it. The United States needs to work to reduce the incentives that China has to align itself closely with the other three states.

This paper first assesses the depth of cooperation between each pairing among these four states, focusing on their actions so far and on potential scenarios. It then analyzes the factors driving them together and that might lead them to deeper cooperation, arguing that a perceived threat from the West, rather than ideology or economic ties, is the key factor. The next two sections assess the current and future threats that cooperation between these states poses to the United States. A concluding section draws policy implications.

Cooperation in Pairs So Far

Although China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are now often viewed as an aligned group, cooperation among them has been almost entirely bilateral so far. This section explains the state of cooperation between each pair, in increasing order of importance. By far the most significant instances of their cooperation have been in the context of Russia's war on Ukraine. Whether this cooperation will survive the war is uncertain. The threats from deeper future cooperation between these pairs are greater, but future cooperation is not foreordained and should not be extrapolated from straight line projections based on very recent trends.

Iran and North Korea

Of the six pairs, the weakest is that of Iran and North Korea. Fear of the United States unites these two rogue powers, but they have little to offer each other strategically. They are two of the most diplomatically isolated states in the world, are heavily sanctioned, and are separated by 4,000 miles.[6]

Iran and North Korea have shared defense technology, especially for ballistic missiles. Their missiles and military submarines have similarities that suggest some technology sharing. For example, Iran's Shahab-3 medium-range ballistic missile resembles North Korea's Hawasong-14 missile. Satellite imagery of missile silos in North Korea also suggests Iranian technical expertise went into their design.[7] Iranian and North Korean weapon manufacturers have also collaborated on some joint projects.[8] North Korea meanwhile sells some inexpensive weapons to Iran's proxies in the Middle East. For example, Hamas used North Korean grenade launchers in its attack on Israel in October 2023. North Korea has sought to provide the Houthis with Scud C and Burkan-1 missiles.[9] Beyond these limited weapons sales, however, neither country is in a position to assist the other. Both are cash strapped and economically weak.[10]

China and Iran

Iran looks to China for economic succor and likely hopes that China's deteriorating relationship with the United States and its need for assured access to hydrocarbons will open a new era in cooperation and alleviate the pressure that sanctions have put it under. Beijing can help Tehran in this regard, but only so much.

China is Iran's largest trade partner and the largest market for its oil exports.[11] Iran wants expanded access to China's market and hopes for Chinese investment. The two countries signed a Strategic Partnership Plan in 2021 that identified $400 billion of potential Chinese investments in the Iranian economy over the following 25 years—a potential lifeline in the face of international sanctions on Iran. In return, China will continue to receive a supply of heavily discounted Iranian oil, which increased from 818,000 barrels a day in 2021 to a million in 2023.[12] The 2021 agreement also includes the development of two joint ports in Iran, and thereby the security of China's access to Middle East energy resources.[13]

Structural factors will limit further cooperation, however. China is looking to Iran as part of a broader strategy of building up influence across the Middle East so that it can secure market access and a stable, diversified supply of energy, all while weakening America's influence and boosting its prestige as a global power. For China, economic relations with Iran are less important than those with the Gulf States that are Iran's adversaries. For example, in 2022, China's trade with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia totaled $99 billion and

$87 billion, respectively,[14] whereas its trade with Iran was $16 billion.[15] Iran accounted for only 10 percent of China's total oil imports in 2023, a smaller portion than its adversaries in the Gulf.[16] Beijing will avoid tilting too deeply in Tehran's direction in order to ensure this balance in its energy supplies.

The need to balance between Iran and the Gulf States probably is one reason why deeper economic cooperation between Beijing and Tehran has been slow to materialize. Since finalizing their cooperation agreement in 2021, Iran has only seen $185 million from China.[17] Slower than expected growth of economic ties has reportedly created frustration within Iran's public, business sector, and government.[18] Iran even temporarily withheld oil from China after the latter refused to pay higher prices at the end of 2023.[19]

Security ties are meanwhile very limited. The 2021 Strategic Partnership Plan lays out plans for more joint military exercises and weapon-systems development, and it is rumored that China has assisted Iran's ballistic-missile program by providing relevant satellite technology.[20] But so far the agreement's military fruits involve only a few joint drills that the U.S. intelligence community has judged to be of little operational value.[21] Iran has reportedly discussed buying Chinese weapons, but they have purchased no new weapons since the end of the embargo on military sales to Iran in 2020 or the signing of the Partnership Plan.[22] Iran's regional proxies have used drones made in China, but even this proliferation seems to be largely commercial in nature rather than a sign of a deeper strategic relationship. After all, Iran's nemesis, Saudi Arabia, also uses these drones.[23] The two regimes have also collaborated on domestic repression techniques, as when China provided Iran with software to shut down the country's internet during the 2009–2010 Green Movement.[24] Such cooperation is undesirable but not a direct threat to U.S. security.

To date, China does not appear to want Iran to acquire a nuclear-weapons capability. It supported the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement and continues to call for all parties to return to it.[25] Beijing also supports Iran's demand that the United States lift the sanctions that the Trump administration reimposed in 2018 before any renewal of the agreement, but some reports indicate it has pressured Tehran in private to return to the negotiating table no matter what.[26] In the event of intensified U.S. pressure on Iran, China might increase its support for it, especially if this pressure was aimed at bringing down the regime. This would blunt the impact of U.S. sanctions, as discussed below.

China and North Korea

No other bilateral relationship considered here is as lopsided as China and North Korea's in terms of the relative power of the two countries. China is far more powerful. The relationship also has more history than the others. It spans nearly three-quarters of a century, the two countries have a long-standing formal defense commitment, and they share a common revolutionary Marxist-Leninist ideology (although they practice it very differently). China

has the upper hand in the relationship and North Korea's supreme leader, Kim Jong Un, recognizes that losing Chinese support would constitute an existential threat to his regime. Hence, both countries uphold an uneasy status quo in a relationship that aims to prevent damage rather than take strategic action on the world stage.

China has a vested interest in propping up North Korea, no matter how difficult a partner it is. China would face a massive refugee crisis were the North Korean state to fall apart, not to mention the likely expansion of U.S. ally South Korea across the whole peninsula. The Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy partly stems from its successful support of the north during the Korean War, and its leaders may also fear that a collapse would damage this legitimacy.[27]

Pyongyang meanwhile depends almost entirely on Beijing politically and economically. China's $2.3 billion trade with North Korea accounted for nearly all the latter's trade in 2023.[28] Beijing also allows North Korea to siphon income from North Korean laborers sent to work in China despite a U.N. Security Council resolution banning the practice.[29] A few years ago, Pyongyang was estimated to receive $500 million annually this way, which it spends on its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.[30] China also illicitly facilitates the export of millions of barrels of oil to North Korea through ship-to-ship transfers.[31]

While China's support lessens the economic pressure that international sanctions put on Pyongyang, China's security commitment is essential for it.[32] Beijing also defends North Korea in international forums, vetoing resolutions that would tighten sanctions, and sometimes introducing measures to loosen them.[33]

There are limits, however, to cooperation in this dyad. For example, China has to date refused to provide North Korea with nuclear-weapons technology and expertise, and it has supported some sanctions targeting Pyongyang's nuclear program.[34] Some analysts even concluded that North Korea carried out its ballistic missile test close to Japan in 2022 to demonstrate that it had the long-range capacity to strike areas of value to Beijing.[35]

Mostly, China must manage the risk of disaster in North Korea. The brittleness of the regime poses the greatest challenge.[36] Reunification of the peninsula under South Korea or a government allied with the United States and its allies would be a strategic blow to China's interests. Beijing thus has a vested interest in ensuring that Pyongyang can deter aggression from the south.[37] China also worries that an unstable nuclear North Korea could escalate tensions in ways that cause the United States to strengthen its military posture in the region or that encourage Japan and South Korea to develop their own nuclear weapons—neither of which would be in Beijing's interest.[38]

China might still increase its conventional military or economic support for North Korea under certain conditions; for example, if it concluded that South Korea was considering an attack on the North, or if Japan, South Korea, or another U.S. ally in the region developed

nuclear weapons. During a Taiwan crisis, Beijing might seek to bolster North Korea's military capacity to complicate the U.S. military response. Otherwise, the relationship will remain characterized by North Korea's dependency and China's fear of its collapse and is unlikely to change fundamentally for the foreseeable future.

North Korea and Russia

The war in Ukraine and shared antipathy toward the United States has turned the once chilly relationship between North Korea and Russia toward pragmatic and growing cooperation. Pyongyang has supplied Moscow with much-needed munitions in exchange for cash, weapons-manufacturing supplies, the possibility of advanced military technology, and, in 2024, a rekindled security agreement. Russia's opening to North Korea is one of the more dramatic aspects of Moscow's effort to reorient Russian political, economic, and military structures away from the West. Nevertheless, the main driver of the relationship has been the war in Ukraine. Whether Russia's relationship with North Korea will continue to deepen once the war ends and Russia's need for assistance wanes is far from certain.

Since September 2023, North Korea has reportedly sent Russia as many as five million artillery shells.[39] This is a significant number in light of estimates that Russia only has the capacity to make 2–3 million shells a year.[40] Russia has used North Korean Kn-23/24 ballistic missiles in Ukraine, although the failure rate for these missiles is reportedly quite high.[41]

These supplies make it easier for Russia to prosecute its war on Ukraine, in part by allowing it to hold more of its advanced weapons in reserve for a scenario in which NATO gets directly involved.[42] That said, the weapons from North Korea are not decisive, especially now that Russia's military industrial base has reconfigured itself to meet most of its current needs.[43]

Russia has also helped North Korea circumvent economic sanctions through ship-to-ship transfers of oil and by welcoming illicit North Korean immigrant laborers whose earnings help fund the Kim regime.[44] But the overall economic relationship is minuscule—by some estimates it amounted to only $48 million in 2019 before North Korea closed its borders during the COVID-19 pandemic.[45] The two countries signed three joint infrastructure projects before the pandemic, but construction has yet to begin on any of these.[46]

Russia provides some political support to North Korea in international forums. For example, it has argued in the UN Security Council against certain provisions of sanctions against the country, including those capping its oil imports and targeting its nuclear industry.[47] In March 2024, Russia vetoed a UN resolution renewing the mandate of the UN Panel of Experts (PoE), which monitors the UN sanctions regime on North Korea.[48]

North Korea and Russia signed a treaty for comprehensive strategic partnership in June 2024.[49] The treaty states that if "either side faces an armed invasion and is in a state of war, the other side will immediately use all available means to provide military and other

assistance in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter and the laws of each country."[50] This has a foreboding sound to it, but does not necessarily mean security cooperation between North Korea and Russia will accelerate or that either side would actually do much to assist the other in wartime. "Military and other assistance" is a vague term, and Russia likely intentionally kept it so to ensure some flexibility in the event that North Korea gets itself into a war and invokes the treaty.[51] Putin has not described the partnership as a formal alliance, whereas Kim quickly touted his new "ally" to the world.[52] In the near term, it is also unclear why Russia would, or if even it could, divert meaningful resources from its war in Ukraine to support North Korea. Finally, the agreement could get Russia into trouble with China, which may fear losing leverage over Pyongyang.

There is nevertheless a possibility of eventual deeper defense cooperation that could be dangerous for U.S. interests. Putin's visit to North Korea in June 2024 indicated intent to deepen the relationship, and it seems very likely that North Korea will continue producing artillery shells and missiles for Russia for as long as the latter needs them for the war. Russia will probably provide North Korea with some conventional military technology in return. Providing technology to help Pyongyang develop more advanced aircraft or further its development of intercontinental ballistic missiles would be especially problematic for the United States. The chances of Russia doing so will increase the longer the war goes on or if it faces reverses in Ukraine, which would make North Korean arms production more important and the possibility that Pyongyang might extract more such technology more likely.[53] In this scenario, Russia might seek to enhance Pyongyang's military manufacturing capacity, in the same way that the United States and its allies have sought to strengthen their defense industrial base. North Korea would welcome the chance to become a global weapons supplier and has a history of proliferating weapons throughout illicit networks across multiple continents.[54]

Finally, as the drive to thwart the West increasingly animates its foreign policy, Russia could take a more benign view of North Korea's nuclear program than in the past. The war in Ukraine, coupled with the reality of North Korea's nuclear weapons arsenal, could cause Moscow to reconsider its historical position. Russia may in fact have already provided North Korea with militarily-relevant satellite technology. During his June 2024 trip to North Korea, Putin threatened to proliferate military technology to the country, comparing such support to Western support to Ukraine.[55] This would have very negative consequences for the security of the United States and its allies. Here again, however, Russia's threat is directly related to the war in Ukraine, and it seems unlikely that the Kremlin would go through with it if the war were to end.

Iran and Russia

The war in Ukraine has opened the door to cooperation between Iran and Russia in some important areas, most of which benefits the latter's war effort. There is a foundation for future security cooperation, but the two countries still face many barriers to developing a truly strategic partnership.

Iran and Russia have often been on opposite sides of disputes—for example, in the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea—but relations began to improve in 2015 when Moscow lent military support to Syria's beleaguered President Bashar al-Assad, who is Iran's ally. Moscow and Tehran coordinated some of their military efforts and conducted joint operations, which helped the Assad regime fight its way back from the brink of overthrow.[56] In 2015, the general staffs of Iran and Russia concluded an agreement on logistics.[57] This cooperation strengthened ties between the countries and appears to have provided a foundation for coordination after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022.

As with North Korea, Russia's invasion of Ukraine opened the door to new cooperation with Iran. The most high-profile has been Tehran's support to Moscow's war effort with the sale of thousands of its Mohajer and, especially, Shahed drones.[58] Russia has used these to cripple Ukraine's infrastructure and to saturate its missile defense systems with incoming targets.[59] Using these drones has also allowed Russia to maintain higher levels of missile stocks.[60] Iran has also helped Russia fill the gap in its munitions stockpiles, and in 2024 provided it with hundreds of ballistic missiles.[61] However, Russia is now producing drones itself in a facility in Tatarstan, raising the question of how much it will rely on Iran for future supplies.[62]

In 2023, Russia sold Iran eavesdropping devices, advanced photography devices, and lie detectors.[63] They have also collaborated on cyber issues through a 2021 agreement that is primarily focused on sharing intelligence about U.S. cyber operations and bolstering defensive capabilities.[64] They have not shared offensive cyber capabilities, in part because each one fears the other may become a foe and turn these capabilities against it.[65]

Russia has reportedly promised to eventually provide Iran with Su-35 fighter jets and advanced air-defense systems.[66] Some Russian technology has already made its way to Iran, including the Yak-130 aircraft used to train Su-35 pilots, but the scale of this is unclear.[67] An influx of Russian technology would bolster Iran's military against the Gulf states, but it would probably be slow in training pilots and developing the maintenance and other infrastructure necessary to operate these aircraft if Russia did not also provide these capabilities.[68]

The most important technology that Iran could acquire from Russia is nuclear, but the prospects for cooperation in this sphere are limited by Russia's interests. Moscow would probably prefer that Tehran not acquire a nuclear weapons capability—at least, as long as there has not been a major proliferation of nuclear weapons to other countries in the region or around the world. Russia said it supported Iran and the United States renegotiating the nuclear deal before the war in Ukraine.[69] Even with that effort now moribund, its relations with the Gulf states will make it difficult for Moscow to support a nuclear Iran—at least overtly.[70] Russia might accept Iran as a nuclear power if it were to develop the capacity on its own, rather than push back against it as the United States would. Tehran's possession of nuclear weapons could in this way become a flashpoint between Russia and the United States.

Iran has offered Russia rhetorical support for its war on Ukraine, with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei endorsing the invasion as a "defensive act" in the face of an imperialistic West and an aggressive NATO.[71] Moscow gains very little from this support, however, except in the parts of the Middle East where Iran retains some legitimacy.[72]

Facing stringent international sanctions, Iran and Russia can benefit from deepening their economic ties, but the potential for this should not be exaggerated. They have announced the construction of a rail, road, and sea corridor to connect their economies and increase exchange, for example, but this faces major obstacles, including disagreements about funding and a general lack of it, major construction delays, and the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.[73] There are also structural limitations on what these two oil-exporting states can offer each other beyond weapons. Russia was Iran's fifth-largest trading partner in 2022 and the largest investor in the country, but Iran's share of Russian trade constituted less than 1 percent of Russia's total trade—making Iran Russia's sixteenth-largest partner.[74] In fact, despite signing multiple trade agreements, Russia and Iran's trade decreased by 17 percent in 2023 compared to 2022, and was of roughly similar size to the European Union's ($5 billion).[75] Any additional sanctions on Iran, however, would further increase the relative importance of trade with Russia for Tehran.

Iran and Russia meanwhile compete for the same markets. Both sell oil to China, which has hampered their price-setting ability, and Russia has also undercut Iran across a range of other commodities.[76] Moreover, as long as Moscow, like Beijing, seeks a balanced relationship with the Arab and Gulf States, its ability to deepen its relationship with Iran will be constrained.

China and Russia

The "no limits" partnership proclaimed by China and Russia just days before the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 lies at the center of U.S. concerns about cooperation among these four countries.[77] They are the largest and most powerful members of the group, and their cooperation will define its future. But, in their case too, the future of cooperation is uncertain.

Their long-standing security relationship centers on Russia's support for the development and modernization of China's military. In the last decade, they have conducted joint military exercises, some including up to 300,000 Russian troops and 32 Chinese ships, and some smaller ones targeted at specific issues like counterterrorism.[78] Recent exercises have included a naval patrol near Alaska and flying bombers around Japan during President Joe Biden's trip to Japan in 2022 and sailing a flotilla of eleven ships close to Alaska in 2023.[79]

China meanwhile appears to have provided Russia with a range of dual-use goods, including machine tools, semiconductors, drone engines, and other technology for its war effort.[80] In September 2024, the United States claimed that this assistance was now going beyond dual use technologies, and that Russia was providing China with advanced technologies in response.[81]

This is obviously concerning, but the fact that Beijing has tried to maintain deniability and to avoid blatant violations of sanctions on Russia suggests that it is not wholly committed to this support and fears Western reprisals.[82] Even as it supports Russia, Beijing may in fact have lingering frustrations with Moscow because the war has complicated its relations with Europe—a fact that Washington should continue to seek to exploit.[83]

Economic relations between China and Russia matter mainly for Russia—with the exception of energy exchange, which is important for both. Trade between the two countries reached $240 billion in 2023, a significant increase from $190 billion the previous year.[84] But Russia accounts for only 4 percent of China's trade, whereas China accounts for nearly 22 percent of Russia's trade.[85] China does want Russian energy in its portfolio to strengthen the resilience of its supply and its imports of Russian energy have grown since 2022. Even here, however, the dependency is mutual: nearly half of Russian energy exports currently go to China.[86]

For China, cooperation with Russia is at least in part defensive and aimed at preventing a major defeat in the war, a collapse, or a change of regime in Moscow. Russia's collapse or defeat at the hands of the West would be very detrimental to China's security. Chaos along its northern border would pose a direct threat, but loss of access to Russian energy could be even more serious. And for Russia to be incorporated into a U.S.-oriented European order would be a geopolitical catastrophe from Beijing's perspective.

To be sure, a shared autocratic antipathy for some aspects of the liberal international order does bring China and Russia together. Both have an interest in molding the existing international order to accommodate autocratic states. And, just as democracies have a broad interest in seeing the number of democracies increase or at least not decrease, authoritarian states have an interest in maintaining stability in their peers.[87] But, as discussed in the next section, this shared antipathy should not be mistaken for ideological convergence. It is probably insufficient as the basis for a true alliance. These two countries do not have identical preferences regarding the international order; for example, China has a much greater stake in sustaining the rules and institutions that underpin international trade and finance.[88]

The trajectory of the relationship will therefore depend primarily on China's evaluation of its interests. It will not want to develop dependencies on Russia's economy, and it has already built a wide array of energy providers to ensure that disruptions in supply from Russia would not cripple it. Some reports in fact suggest that Beijing has delayed construction of a second natural gas pipeline between the two countries to reduce dependency on Russia.[89] China

also seeks to build aircraft engines at scale, which would significantly reduce one of its major military dependencies on Russia.[90] Chinese businesses may not have faith in the Russian economy because they see it as corrupt and facing a grim future, especially when compared with other options.[91] For its part, Moscow has consistently accused Beijing of industrial espionage and stealing its military technology.[92]

Drawn Together by Common Threat Perception

All four of these countries are obviously non-democratic, but too often Washington policy discussion has overemphasized the extent to which shared ideology brings them together. It is not, in fact, a key driver of their cooperation. First of all, these states are not primarily unified by ideology and their regimes differ. Scholars consider Russia to be a personalistic dictatorship.[93] North Korea and China share a similar Marxist ideology, but North Korea is a personalistic-dynastic dictatorship while China is an authoritarian single-party system.[94] Iran is an Islamic theocratic oligarchy, albeit one trending in the direction of a military junta regime.

The ideologies that animate these four autocracies moreover do not inherently prescribe conflict with the United States. This makes them very different from the Soviet Union, whose Marxist ideology not only predicted but also implicitly required the overthrow of the liberal capitalist world. China and North Korea are in theory both Marxist states, but China's Marxism has long accepted the necessity of a healthy dose of market forces, and the North Korean regime's dedication to Marxist principles is easily questioned. The nationalism that animates Russia's autocracy does not inherently insist upon destroying the liberal democratic world, even though Putin often contrasts Russian values with Western liberalism. Iran's theocratic and universalist ideology probably comes closest to insisting upon the destruction of Western liberalism, but it is hard to see this as a realistic threat, unlike communism in the twentieth century.

What these states do share is an autocratic antipathy for the liberal aspects of the U.S.-led order, which they believe threatens their very existence. This is important because threat perceptions play a key role in the formation of alliances, blocs, and groups.[95] Over the last decade, relations between the United States and its allies and each of the four countries have deteriorated. In 2018, the United States withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal and intensified its pressure on Tehran. In 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, provoking a massive reaction from NATO that has cut Russia off from Europe, increased defense spending in many European countries, and resulted in the further enlargement of the alliance. The United States has identified China as its main adversary in the Trump administration's 2018 National Defense

Strategy and in the Biden administration's 2022 National Security Strategy.[96] And the United States and its allies have long ostracized and sanctioned North Korea on account of its nuclear program.

Economic opportunity is meanwhile not a major factor in the cooperation among the four countries, in each of which the state plays a strong role in the economy. China has the most free market of the four, but it has been increasingly statist under President Xi Jinping.[97] Russia's economy has grown more militarized and reliant on state interventions as a consequence of the war in Ukraine.[98] Iran is also heavily statist and North Korea is a command economy.[99] This commonality facilitates a degree of economic cooperation because it does not include expectations of a level playing field, something that impedes cooperation between free-market and state-centered economies.[100] But the latter are also inherently more limited in their scope for economic exchange (and usually also for economic growth).[101] Much of the economic cooperation between the four states to date has sought to relieve pressure from U.S. sanctions, either with direct payments or promises of investment. This is a problem for Washington and its allies insofar as it blunts the coercive power of their sanctions but is not a very robust form of economic exchange, as discussed below. There is no comparison with the levels of exchange between the United States and its allies in Asia or Europe.

Economic relations between the four states are moreover very unequal. They are less important to China than to the others. As noted above, Beijing does seek to guarantee its access to Iranian and Russian energy, but on the whole its economic position within this group is near-hegemonic. It has by far the most to offer and the extent of its economic cooperation with the other three will be critical in determining whether they are able to sustain and grow their economies.

Current Threats

China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia threaten the United States' interests and complicate its statecraft in a number of ways. But this has been the case for several years. Sound policy should distinguish between the challenge that existing forms of cooperation outlined above pose today and the threat that their cooperation would create were it to deepen. As of now, cooperation between these U.S. adversaries has created some problems, largely because of the support Russia has gained for its war on Ukraine. Beyond that, however, the impact of their cooperation on U.S. interests is limited to lessening the effect of sanctions and intensifying the pressure on Washington for reforms to the global order.

The support that Russia receives in its war effort is by far the most harmful consequence of cooperation. Drones and missiles from Iran, munitions from North Korea, and dual-use equipment, including billions of dollars in microchips from China have increased Russia's

capacity to attack Ukraine. This kind of support has probably also increased Putin's confidence that Russia can outlast the Western commitment to support Ukraine and complicated U.S. and allied strategy as a result. Indeed, the extent to which cooperation between these four states has intensified as a consequence of the war in Ukraine is striking. Their cooperation will persist and deepen as long as the war persists.

Beyond Ukraine, their cooperation has also alleviated the pressure of U.S. sanctions, but the strategic significance of this lightening should not be overstated. Many of these sanctions were not achieving their desired outcomes in the first place. For example, Russia was no closer to accepting NATO's dominance in Europe or stopping its war as a consequence of the sanctions it faces. Economic sanctions on North Korea have failed to prevent the development of its nuclear capabilities. Even if, say, Chinese and Russian support relieves some of the pressure on the regime in Iran, there is no evidence that this increases its unwillingness to come to the negotiating table on U.S. terms. A more accurate evaluation is that the cooperation among the four makes a sanctions approach that was already not working well even less likely to work.

Their cooperation also complicates U.S. statecraft by challenging its preferences for world order, which they frequently criticize. This adds to the pressure on Washington to support broader changes to the institutional structures that underpin the current order, but only to a negligible extent. The group seeks to nurture and sustain this wider commonality but is not creating that dissatisfaction. Many of their criticisms are already shared by other countries—including emerging powers such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, and South Africa.[102] Their critiques of the U.S.-led world order also conceal differences over the extent to which they accept and participate in it. For example, China often criticizes the current order but participates actively in many aspects of it and has benefitted from this.[103]

Potential Threats

As of now, the problem created by cooperation among this grouping is thus largely limited to its impact on the war in Ukraine. Future scenarios exist, however, that could be far more problematic for the United States. These involve forms of intensified proliferation of nuclear and missile technology and especially opportunistic coordination during a crisis or war.

To begin with, if Russia and China transferred vital nuclear technologies to Iran and North Korea, it would obviously damage important U.S. interests. So far, Russia appears to have eschewed doing so, but if that were to change, it would accelerate these states developing their nuclear capabilities. Russia might change its policy, for example, if it assessed that there was no hope of preventing North Korea from further developing its nuclear program, and that it was better to bandwagon with its partner and get the credit than attempt to hold it back. China remains far more integrated into the international system and has even less

incentive to proliferate to countries like North Korea—as noted above, North Korea's nuclear program tends to increase the chances that South Korea and Japan will develop nuclear weapons of their own, which would be viewed very negatively in Beijing. Under circumstances where Beijing is considering a cross-straits operation, however, they could reconsider their traditional policy in an effort to increase the strain on the U.S. military. Needless to say, Chinese or Russian proliferation would impose large defensive costs on the United States and its allies, including far-reaching and expensive investments in missile defense and other countermeasures against the Iranian and North Korean nuclear capabilities. In the case of Iran, it could provoke a nuclear cascade or war in the Middle East.

The consequences of these four countries coordinating opportunistically during a crisis or war could be even more problematic from a U.S. perspective. U.S. resources are already strained to support Ukraine, to stabilize the Middle East, and to find a political-military equilibrium in East Asia. There is no evidence that China, Iran, and Russia coordinate policy across these regions now, but they might do so in the future in order to increase the strain on the United States globally. In this way, they might hope to wear America down by confronting it with a state of near-constant global crises.

In a more extreme version of this scenario, one of the four countries could take advantage of a crisis in another region to start a war in its own region. For example, were China to attempt a military operation against Taiwan—whether an all-out assault or a blockade operation—Russia might seek to take advantage of the strain on U.S. resources with an even more aggressive military campaign in Ukraine or even with an incursion into NATO territory. This opportunistic behavior by Russia might occur with China's encouragement or it might just occur naturally. Similarly, a major escalation with Iran in the Middle East that draws in more U.S. naval and air forces could also embolden China to take a more aggressive approach to Taiwan, including military action.

None of these scenarios are foreordained, however. Several factors will continue to complicate these states' capacity even for informal strategic coordination in a crisis. Many of these factors are outlined above, including their differing strategic outlooks, differing relationships with United States and its allies, the disparities in their political and economic power, their often-weak economic links, and the limited practical military cooperation. In general, this group faces credibility problems that weaken their capacity for collective action. This is in part because authoritarian or autocratic leaders are less likely to make credible commitments to deep structural cooperation because this entails limits on sovereignty, which they are especially eager to avoid.[104] Such commitments require ceding some degree of control in foreign policy, something they are loathe to do. The lack of domestic constraints on and the generally capricious nature of such regimes add to their difficulty to trust one another.[105] Regardless of what its leadership says, for example, Russia is unlikely to take a reckless swipe at the Baltic states simply to favor China, unless it judges the political, military, and economic context in Europe to also be very favorable. China knows this and would view any such Russian commitment in this light—with skepticism.

China as the Core of an Effective U.S. Strategy

The relationships between the four states have thus deepened in the last few years, but they remain provisional. They have nothing near the depth of the United States' relationships with its key allies, or even the Soviet Union's relationship with the Warsaw Pact nations, whose territory it occupied, whose politics it controlled, and whose economies it dominated. Truly strategic cooperation would not be bilateral but entail joint mechanisms, regular military exercises that integrate command and control at the strategic and operational level, military interoperability, and joint strategic planning. It would probably also involve high levels of economic interdependence, especially relative to potential adversaries. In contrast, today, China's level of economic interdependence with the West is much greater than it is with Iran, Russia, or North Korea.[106]

The best way for the United States to halt or reverse the trend toward greater cooperation between the four states is thus to seek to attenuate China's relationship with the other three. Iran, North Korea, and Russia would be very weak and isolated from the world without China's support. Beijing's actual and potential role as a leader, organizer, and proponent of cooperation between these powers also looms large because alliances and groups often rely on strong leadership for their sustainment.[107]

As tensions between the four states and the West have increased, China has been more willing to play that leadership role, but it is not clear how much it would sacrifice in its positive economic relations with the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia in order to organize deeper cooperation among these economically weak partners. China is deeply integrated into the world economically and politically in ways that the other three countries are not. China benefits from the existing world order far more than the other three and prefers different end states from them when it comes to international rules of the road, for example. China wants reforms of the world order, but what Russia, Iran and North Korea seek more resembles an outright revolution. Russia moreover now sees its relationship with Europe as almost entirely adversarial whereas China seeks to sustain a positive economic and political relationship with the wealthy European nations.

The United States and its allies therefore need ways of reducing China's incentives to cooperate with the rogue regimes in Iran, Russia, and North Korea. There is no chance of returning to the positive relations of the first two decades after the end of the cold war but more constructive political and economic relations with the United States and its allies would dampen Beijing's interest in deepening its relationship with the other three. Meanwhile, the possibility of the United States being drained by coordinated global crises or a multi-front war should be mitigated by a greater effort to prioritize among regions, increased burden-sharing with allies, and greater discipline in choosing commitments overall.

The United States probably cannot break the link between China and Russia, especially in the near future while the Ukraine war continues. But it can attenuate that link, for example, by leveraging Beijing's interest in maintaining a positive relationship with Europe and by adopting a balanced strategy toward Beijing itself. U.S. leaders should be cognizant that there is a connection between the degree of hostility Beijing perceives from Washington and its willingness to provide meaningful support to Moscow. It would therefore be dangerous for Washington to make the cooperation between these states a framing strategic concept. There is just too much uncertainty about how much that cooperation will deepen in the future.

Meanwhile, the future of U.S.-China relations is also uncertain. Beijing may have already "locked in" the assumption of an adversarial future with Washington, but its behavior to date suggests that it has not and that it still has some interest in maintaining a positive political and economic relationship with the United States and Europe. If America is does not find a mode of coexistence with China that reduces the tension in their relationship and Chinese perception of threat, Beijing is likely to conclude that its best option is to double down on its relationship with these other U.S. adversaries. In this case, their cooperation will deepen and accelerate, and the risks for the United States will increase. Washington and its allies would have no alternative but to respond to this adversarial bloc with a military-economic Cold War-style containment policy. This outcome would be very costly to citizens of the United States and its allies. But this is not predestined and predictions of future cooperation between these adversaries should not be allowed to become self-fulfilling prophesies.

About the Authors

Christopher S. Chivvis is a senior fellow and director of the American Statecraft Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Jack Keating was a James C. Gaither Junior Fellow in the Carnegie American Statecraft Program.

Notes

1 Philip Zelikow, "Confronting Another Axis: History, Humility, and Wishful Thinking," *Texas National Security Review*, May 2024, https://tnsr.org/2024/05/confronting-another-axis-history-humility-and-wishful-thinking/.

2 Steny Hoyer, "The seats in this House are empty today, while democracy and freedom are under siege in Ukraine," Press Release, December 14, 2023, https://hoyer.house.gov/media/press-releases/hoyer-seats-house-are-empty-today-while-democracy-and-freedom-are-under-siege.

3 Yaroslav Trofimov, "The War in Ukraine has Created a New 'Axis of Evil'," *Wall Street Journal*, December 21, 2023, https://www.wsj.com/world/the-war-in-ukraine-has-created-a-new-axis-of-evil-cd50a398.

4 "Transcript: Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell on 'Face the Nation' Oct. 22, 2023," CBS News, October 22, 2023, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mitch-mcconnell-senate-minority-leader-face-the-nation-transcript-10-22-2023/.

5 Andrea Kendall Taylor and Richard Fontaine, "The Axis of Upheaval", *Foreign Affairs*, April 2024; Hal Brands, "The New Autocratic Alliances," *Foreign Affairs*, March 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/axis-upheaval-russia-iran-north-korea-taylor-fontaine.

6 "Iran/North Korea," Observatory for Economic Complexity, Massachusetts Institute for Technology. https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/irn/partner/prk.

7 "Iran and North Korea: Proliferation Partners," United Against Nuclear Iran, June 2022, https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/north-korea-iran.

8 Jason Bartlett and Emily Jin, "How US Sanctions Are Pushing Iran, Venezuela, and North Korea Closer Together," The Diplomat, December 12, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/how-us-sanctions-are-pushing-iran-venezuela-and-north-korea-closer-together/.

9 Joaquin Matamis, "North Korea's Covert Alliance With Iran Aligned Militias in the Middle East," Stimson Center, October 24, 2023, https://www.stimson.org/2023/north-koreas-covert-alliance-with-iran-aligned-militias-in-the-middle-east/; Samuel Ramani, "The North Korea-Iran Relationship: An Anti-American Alliance or Transactional Partnership?" 38North, November 24, 2021, https://www.38north.org/2021/11/the-north-korea-iran-relationship-an-anti-american-alliance-or-transactional-partnership/.

10 Lee, Jeong-Ho. “Kim Jong Un Acknowledges Dire State of Economy, Urges Action.” Radio Free Asia, January 24, 2024. https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/nk-economy-warn-01242024213121.html.

11 “Iran Deepens Ties with China,” United States Institute of Peace, February 15, 2023, https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/feb/15/president-raisi-visits-china.

12 “Iran and China: A Trade Lifeline,” United States Institute of Peace, July 5, 2023, https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/jun/28/iran-china-trade-lifeline#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20Iranian%20oil%20exports,1%20million%20barrels%20per%20day; Muyu Xu, “Explainer: Iran’s Expanding Oil Trade with Top Buyer China,” Reuters, November 10, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/irans-expanding-oil-trade-with-top-buyer-china-2023-11-10/; Farnaz Fassihi and Steven Lee Meyers, “Defying U.S., China and Iran Near Trade and Military Partnership,” *New York Times*, July 11, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/11/world/asia/china-iran-trade-military-deal.html.

13 Scott Harold and Alireza Nader, “China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations,” Rand Centre for Middle East Public Policy, 2012, https://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP351.html

14 “Iran and China: A Trade Lifeline,” The Iran primer, United States Institute of Peace, July 5, 2023, https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/jun/28/iran-china-trade-lifeline#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20Iranian%20oil%20exports,1%20million%20barrels%20per%20day.

15 Ibid.

16 “Erica Downs and Edward Fishman, “Q&A | Potential Impacts of New US Sanctions on Iran’s Oil Sales to China,” *Center for Global Energy Policy at the Columbia School of International Public Affairs*, May 28, 2024. https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/qa-potential-impacts-of-new-us-sanctions-on-irans-oil-exports-to-china/#:~:text=In%202023%2C%20China%20imported%201.1,any%20Iranian%20oil%20in%202023.

17 Jonathan Fulton, “China doesn’t have as much leverage in the Middle East as one thinks – at least when it comes to Iran,” The Atlantic Council, February 1, 2024;; “Iran and China: A Trade Lifeline,” United States Institute of Peace, July 2023, https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/jun/28/iran-china-trade-lifeline#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20Iranian%20oil%20exports,1%20million%20barrels%20per%20day.

18 Jonathan Fulton, “China Doesn’t Have as Much Leverage in the Middle East as One Thinks—at Least When It Comes to Iran,” Atlantic Council, February 1, 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/china-mena-leverage-iran-houthis-yemen/.

19 Chen Aizhu and Muyu Xu, “Exclusive: Iran’s Oil Trade with China Stalls as Tehran Demands Higher Prices,” Reuters, January 8, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/irans-oil-trade-with-china-stalls-tehran-demands-higher-prices-2024-01-05/.

20 Will Green and Taylore Roth, “China-Iran Relations: A Limited but Enduring Strategic Partnership,’ US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, June 2021, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-06/China-Iran_Relations.pdf; Heah Sloane, “Droning On: China Floods the Middle East With UAVs,” The Diplomat, September 2022, https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/droning-on-china-floods-the-middle-east-with-uavs/; Lucille Greer and Esfandyar Batmanghelidj, “Last Among Equals: The China-Iran Partnership in a Regional Context, The Wilson Center, September 2020, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/MEP_200831_OCC%2038%20v3%20%281%29.pdf.

21 “Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community,” Office of the Director of National Intelligence, February 2024, https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2024-Unclassified-Report.pdf.

22 “Iran and China: Military Ties,” *The United States Institute of Peace,* June 28, 2023, https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/jun/28/iran-china-military-ties.

23 Jared Szuba, “Drones used by Iran-backed militias are coming from China, US says,” Al-Monitor, August 5, 2022 https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/08/drones-used-iran-backed-militias-are-coming-china-us-says; Heath Sloane, “Droning On: China Floods the Middle East With UAVs,” The Diplomat, September 2, 2022, https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/droning-on-china-floods-the-middle-east-with-uavs/.

24 Golnaz Esfandiari, "Iran To Work With China To Create National Internet System," Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, September 4, 2020, https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-china-national-internet-system-censorship/30820857.html.

25 Jacopo Scita, "Can China Be the JCPOA's Last Hope?" The Diplomat, February 24, 2023, https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/can-china-be-the-jcpoas-last-hope/.

26 Burton, Guy. "Neither China nor Iran Will Get What They Want from Their Relationship." – The Diplomat, February 18, 2023. https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/neither-china-nor-iran-will-get-what-they-want-from-their-relationship/.

27 Thomas J. Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015).

28 "China's Exports to North Korea Return to Growth in November," Reuters, December 20, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-exports-north-korea-return-growth-november-2023-12-20/; Anton Sokolin, "North Korean trade with China doubles in 2023 to highest since pandemic began," North Korea News, January 18, 2024, https://www.nknews.org/2024/01/north-korean-trade-with-china-doubles-in-2023-to-highest-since-pandemic-began/.

29 Ben Frohman, Emma Rafaelof, and Alexis Dale-Huang, "The China-North Korea Strategic Rift: Background and Implications for the United States," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, January 2022, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2022-01/China-North_Korea_Strategic_Rift.pdf.

30 Emma Burrows and Matthew Chance, "Russia's hidden world of North Korean labor," CNN, January 15, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/15/europe/russia-north-korea-labor-intl/index.html.

31 Ibid.

32 Ben Frohman, Emma Rafaelof, and Alexis Dale-Huang, "The China-North Korea Strategic Rift: Background and Implications for the United States," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, January 2022, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2022-01/China-North_Korea_Strategic_Rift.pdf; Ankit Panda, "China and North Korea have a Mutual Defense Treaty, But When Would it Apply?" The Diplomat, August 14, 2017, https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/china-and-north-korea-have-a-mutual-defense-treaty-but-when-would-it-apply/.

33 Ben Frohman, Emma Rafaelof, and Alexis Dale-Huang, "The China-North Korea Strategic Rift: Background and Implications for the United States," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, January 2022, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2022-01/China-North_Korea_Strategic_Rift.pdf.

34 Bruce W. Bennett, "North Korea and China Aren't the Allies You Think They Are," RAND, September 27, 2023, https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/09/north-korea-and-china-arent-the-allies-you-think-they.html.

35 Ibid.

36 Richard Bush, "China's Response to Collapse in North Korea, Brookings Institute, January 23, 2014, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chinas-response-to-collapse-in-north-korea/.

37 Bonnie Girard, "Would Korean Reunification Threaten China?' The Diplomat, June 2018, https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/would-korean-reunification-threaten-china/.

38 Bruce W. Bennett and Diana Y. Myers, "North Korean Nuclear Weapons Pose an Existential Threat to China," RAND, July 13, 2021, https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2021/07/north-korean-nuclear-weapons-pose-an-existential-threat.html.

39 "North Korea sent Russia millions of munitions in exchange for food: Seoul", Al Jazeera, February 28, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/28/n-korea-sent-russia-millions-of-munitions-in-exchange-for-food-says-seoul; Conversation with Dara Massicot, senior fellow at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Soo-Hyang Choi, "North Korea Sent Russia Millions of Artillery Shells, South Korea Says," Bloomberg, June14, 2024, https://time.com/6988568/north-korea-russia-artillery-shell-south-korea-defense-minister/.

40 Max Boot, "Weapons of War: The Race Between Russia and Ukraine," Council on Foreign Relations, April 24, 2024, https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/weapons-war-race-between-russia-and-ukraine; Jack Detsch, "Ukraine is still Outgunned by Russia," *Foreign Policy*, April 23, 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/04/23/ukraine-war-artillery-shortage-production-military-aid-bill/.

41 “Russia used at least 20 North Korean ballistic missiles in attacks on Ukraine, Kyiv says,” Politico, February 22, 2024, https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraines-sbu-found-evidence-russia-used-at-least-20-north-korean-missiles-to-attack-ukraine/; Olesia Safronova, “Ukraine Says Russia Has Launched 24 North Korean Missiles So Far,” Bloomberg News, February 16, 2024, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-02-16/war-in-ukraine-kyiv-says-russia-has-fired-at-least-24-north-korean-missiles?sref=QmOxnLFz; Tom Balmforth and David Gauthier-Villars, “Exclusive: Ukraine examines N.Korean missile debris amid fears of Moscow-Pyongyang axis,” Reuters, May 7, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/ukraine-examines-nkorean-missile-debris-amid-fears-moscow-pyongyang-axis-2024-05-07/.

42 Conversation with Dara Massicot, senior fellow at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Hyung-Jin Kim and Kim Tong-Hyung, “Kim Jong Un meets Vladimir Putin in Russia. What do Pyongyang and Moscow want from each other?” AP News, September 13, 2023, https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-russia-kim-putin-summit-c44735b9903e6f30e7e8d673ef4c77f3.

43 Ibid.

44 Emma Burrows and Matthew Chance, “Russia’s hidden world of North Korean labor,” CNN, January 15, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/15/europe/russia-north-korea-labor-intl/index.html; Michael Schwirtz, “Haley Says Russia ‘Actively Working’ to Subvert North Korea Sanctions,” *New York Times*, September 17, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/17/world/asia/haley-russia-north-korea-sanctions.html.

45 Dasl Yoon, “WSJ News Exclusive | North Korean-Russian Trade Rebounds, Satellite Images Show,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 17, 2023, https://www.wsj.com/articles/north-korean-russian-trade-rebounds-satellite-images-show-8423f37b.

46 Andrei Lenkov, “Behind the Hype: Russia’s Stance on North Korea,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020, https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/82892.

47 Fyodor Tertitsky, “Is North Korea Set to Become Russia’s Aly Following Shoigu’s Visit?” Carnegie Politika, January August 1, 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90315.

48 Victor Cha and Ellen Kim, “Russia’s Veto: Dismembering the UN Sanctions Regime on North Korea” CSIS, March 29, 2024, https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-veto-dismembering-un-sanctions-regime-north-korea]

49 Michelle Ye Hee Lee and Robyn Dixon, “North Korea’s Kim declares ‘full support’ for Russian war in Ukraine,” *Washington Post,* June 19, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/06/18/russia-vladimir-putin-north-korea-kim-jong-un/.

50 “North Korea, Russia agree to immediately offer military help in event of war,” *South China Morning Post*, June 20, 2024, https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/east-asia/article/3267319/north-korea-russia-agree-immediately-offer-military-help-event-war.

51 Kim Tong-Hyung and Jim Heintz, “What’s known, and not known, about the partnership agreement signed by Russia and North Korea,” AP News, June 20, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/russia-north-korea-putin-kim-agreement-7221909867dbb999de8adb23604e3c79.

52 Ibid.

53 Edward Wong and Julian E. Barnes, “Kim Jong-Un and Putin Plan to Meet in Russia to Discuss Weapons,” *New York Times*, September 4, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/04/us/politics/putin-kim-meeting-russia-north-korea-weapons.html. See also, Jon Herskovitz, “North Korea and Russia Accelerate Exchange of Weapons and Resources,” *Time Magazine*, February 27, 2024, https://time.com/6835478/north-korea-speed-up-weapons-shipment-russia/; Hyonhee Shin, “North Korea Received Russian Aid for Satellite Launch - South Korea Lawmakers,” Reuters, November 23, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-received-russian-aid-satellite-launch-south-korea-lawmakers-2023-11-23/.

54 Andrew Yeo, “Expect to see more North Korean weapons reach nonstate armed actors in 2024,” Brookings Institute, February 21, 2024, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/expect-to-see-more-north-korean-weapons-reach-nonstate-armed-actors-in-2024/; Jonathan Corrado and Markus Garlauskas, “The Arsenal of Autocracy,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 15, 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/north-korea/arsenal-autocracy.

55 Paul Sonne, "Putin Threatens to Arm North Korea, Escalating Tension West Over Ukraine," *New York Times,* June 20, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/20/world/asia/putin-north-korea-weapons.html.

56 Nicole Grajewski, "The Evolution of Russian and Iranian Cooperation in Syria," Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 17, 2021, https://www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-russian-and-iranian-cooperation-syria.

57 Agence France-Presse, "Russia Signs Military Cooperation Deal with Iran," *DefenseNews,* January 20, 2015, https://www.defensenews.com/home/2015/01/20/russia-signs-military-cooperation-deal-with-iran/.

58 Dina Esfandiary, "Axis of Convenience," *Foreign Affairs*, February 17, 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/axis-convenience.

59 "Timeline: Iran-Russia Collaboration on Drones," United States Institute of Peace, August 10, 2023, https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/mar/01/timeline-iran-russia-collaboration-drones; Danny Citrinowicz, "Iran is on its way to replacing Russia as a leading arms exporter. The US needs a strategy to counter this trend," Atlantic Council, February 2, 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-drone-uavs-russia.

60 Conversation with Dara Massicot, senior fellow at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2023.

61 Julian E. Barnes, "Iran Sends Drone Trainers to Crimea to Aid Russian Military," *New York Times*, October 18, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/18/us/politics/iran-drones-russia-ukraine.html; Aamer Madhani, "US, G-7 allies warn Iran to back of deal to provide Russia ballistic missiles or face new sanctions," AP News, March 15, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/russian-iran-ballistic-missiles-ukraine-f12dc454b04f7cbe671d2c401e31390c; Parisa Hafezi et al., "Exclusive: Iran sends Russia hundreds of ballistic missiles," Reuters, February 21, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/iran-sends-russia-hundreds-ballistic-missiles-sources-say-2024-02-21/.

62 Benoit Faucon, Nicholas Bariyo, and Matthew Luxmoore, "The Russian Drone Plant That Could Shape the War in Ukraine," *Wall Street Journal*, May 28, 2024, https://www.wsj.com/world/the-russian-drone-plant-that-could-shape-the-war-in-ukraine-7abd5616.

63 Dov Lieber, Benoit Faucon, and Michael Amon, "WSJ News Exclusive | Russia Supplies Iran With Cyber Weapons as Military Cooperation Grows," *Wall Street Journal*, March 27, 2023, https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-supplies-iran-with-cyber-weapons-as-military-cooperation-grows-b14b94cd.

64 "The Iran-Russia Cyber Agreement and U.S. Strategy in the Middle East," Council on Foreign Relations, March 2, 2021, https://www.cfr.org/blog/iran-russia-cyber-agreement-and-us-strategy-middle-east.

65 Conversation with Gavin Wilde, senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2023.

66 Robbie Gramer and Amy Mackinnon, "Iran and Russia Are Closer Than Ever Before," *Foreign Policy*, March 28, 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/05/iran-russia-drones-ukraine-war-military-cooperation/.

67 Joby Warrick, "Iran Seeks 'Billions' Worth of Russian Aircraft and Weapons in Exchange for Drones, U.S. Says," *Washington Post*, June 9, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/06/09/iran-russia-military-drones/.

68 Grant Rumley, "What the Russian-Iran Arms Deals Mean for the Middle East, Middle East Institute, April 19, 2023, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-russia-iran-arms-deals-mean-middle-east.

69 Notte, Hanna. Russia's invasion of Ukraine: The Iran Nuclear Price Tag, February 2023. https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/international/20083.pdf.

70 Robbie Gramer and Amy Mackinnon, "Iran and Russia Are Closer Than Ever Before," *Foreign Policy*, March 28, 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/05/iran-russia-drones-ukraine-war-military-cooperation/.

71 Maziar Motamedi, "NATO would have eventually started Ukraine war: Khamenei to Putin," Al Jazeera, July 19, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/19/russia-putin-meeting-iran-khamenei-and-raisi-tehran.

72 “Tehran Says It Does Not Recognize Annexation of Ukrainian Territories,” Iran International, January 21, 2022, https://www.iranintl.com/en/202301211331.

73 Alex Vatanka, “Russia and Iran Have High Hopes for Each Other,” *Foreign Policy*, March 28, 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/02/russia-iran-grain-trade-china-investment-bri/; “IISS Roundtable – Russia and Iran: isolated from the West and drawing closer,” International Institute of Strategic Studies, October 12, 2022, https://www.iiss.org/en/online-analysis/online-analysis/2022/10/russia-and-iran-isolated-from-the-west-and-drawing-closer/, Emil Avdaliani, “Iran and Russia Enter A New Level of Military Cooperation,” Stimson Center, March 6, 2024, https://www.stimson.org/2024/iran-and-russia-enter-a-new-level-of-military-cooperation/.

74 “Iran Trade Profile,” World Trade Organization, 2023, https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/statis_e/daily_update_e/trade_profiles/IR_e.pdf; Emil Avdaliani, “Iran and Russia Enter A New Level of Military Cooperation,” Stimson Center, March 6, 2024, https://www.stimson.org/2024/iran-and-russia-enter-a-new-level-of-military-cooperation/, “Iran and Russia: Gyrating Trade Flows,” The Iran Primer, United States Institute of Peace, May 18, 2023, https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/may/18/iran-and-russia-gyrating-trade-grows

75 “Iran-EU Trade Rises 8% in Q1 2024.” Tehran Times, May 27, 2024; https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/499105/Iran-EU-trade-rises-8-in-Q1-2024#:~:text=As%20previously%20announced%20by%20Eurostat,stood%20at%20%E2%82%AC5.244%20billion.

76 Nasser Karimi and Vladimir Isachenkov, “Putin, in Tehran, gets strong support from Iran over Ukraine,” AP News, July 20, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-syria-iran-289c3422c8980e7650dbde2c326d248a.

77 “Moscow-Beijing Partnership Has ‘No Limits,’” Reuters, February 4, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/moscow-beijing-partnership-has-no-limits-2022-02-04/.

78 Dmitry Gorenburg et al., “Russian-Chinese Military Cooperation,” Center for Naval Analysis, March 2023, https://www.cna.org/reports/2023/05/Russian-Chinese-Military-Cooperation.pdf.

79 Michael R. Gordon and Nancy A. Youssef, “Russia and China Sent Large Naval Patrol Near Alaska,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 6, 2023, https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-and-china-sent-large-naval-patrol-near-alaska-127de28b; Alastair Gale, “China and Russia Sent Bombers Near Japan as Biden Visited Tokyo,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 24, 2022, https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-and-russia-sent-bombers-near-japan-as-biden-visited-tokyo-11653402634.

80 Kylie Atwood, “China is giving Russia significant support to expand weapons manufacturing as Ukraine war continues, US officials say,” CNN, April 12, 2024, https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/12/politics/china-russia-support-weapons-manufacturing/index.html.

81 Stuart Lau, “US accuses China of giving ‘very substantial’ help to Russia’s war machine” Politico, September 10, 2024, https://www.politico.eu/article/united-states-accuse-china-help-russia-war-kurt-campbell/.

82 Alexander Gabuev, “Putin and Xi’s Unholy Alliance,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/putin-and-xis-unholy-alliance.

83 James Palmer, “Did Russia Catch China Off Guard in Ukraine?” *Foreign Policy*, March 28, 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/02/china-russia-ukraine-invasion-surprise/.

84 “China-Russia 2023 Trade Value Hits Record High of $240 Bln - Chinese Customs,” Reuters, January 12, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/markets/china-russia-2023-trade-value-hits-record-high-240-bln-chinese-customs-2024-01-12/; Simone McCarthy, “China’s Xi Jinping hails Russia cooperation as record trade beats $200 billion target,” CNN, December 21, 2023, https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/21/china/china-russia-relations-record-trade-intl-hnk/index.html; Laura He, “China’s largest oil supplier in 2023 was Russia,” CNN, January 22, 2024, https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/22/business/china-top-oil-supplier-2023-russia-intl-hnk/index.html.

85 Dmitry Gorenburg et al. “Russian-Chinese Military Cooperation,” Center for Naval Analysis, March 2023, https://www.cna.org/reports/2023/05/Russian-Chinese-Military-Cooperation.pdf.

86 Vladimir Soldatkin and Olesya Astakhova, "Russia exports almost all its oil to China and India," Reuters, December 27, 2023. https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/half-russias-2023-oil-petroleum-exports-went-china-russias-novak-2023-12-27/.

87 Edward D. Mansfield, Helen V. Milner, and B. Peter Rosendorff, "Why Democracies Cooperate More: Electoral Control and International Trade Agreements," *International Organization,* Vol. 56, No. 3, 2002.

88 Dmitry Gorenburg et al. "Russian-Chinese Military Cooperation," Center for Naval Analysis, March 2023, https://www.cna.org/reports/2023/05/Russian-Chinese-Military-Cooperation.pdf.

89 Lily McElwee et al., "Xi Goes to Moscow: A Marriage of Inconvenience?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 28, 2023, https://www.csis.org/analysis/xi-goes-moscow-marriage-inconvenience.

90 Alexander Holderness et al., "Powering Proliferation: The Global Engine Market and China's Indigenization," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 21, 2023, https://www.csis.org/analysis/powering-proliferation-global-engine-market-and-chinas-indigenization.

91 Jonathan E. Hillman, "China and Russia: Economic Unequals," Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 15, 2020, https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-and-russia-economic-unequals.

92 Brian Hart, "How Deep Are China-Russia Military Ties?" ChinaPower Project, Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 4, 2022, https://chinapower.csis.org/china-russia-military-cooperation-arms-sales-exercises/; Phillip Ivanov, "Together and Apart: The Conundrum of the China-Russia Partnership," Asia Society, October 11, 2023,https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/together-and-apart-conundrum-china-russia-partnership.

93 Alexander Baturo and Johan A. Elkink, "2. Regime Personalization in Russia," in The New Kremlinology: Understanding Regime Personalization in Russia, (Oxford University Press, 2021).

94 Albert, Eleanor. "North Korea's Power Structure." Council on Foreign Relations, June 17, 2020. https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/north-koreas-power-structure.
"Understanding the Black Box of Chinese Politics." Asia Society Policy Institute. Accessed September 16, 2024. https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/decoding-chinese-politics/introduction-black-box-chinese-policy.

95 Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Cornell University Press, 1987); Mark L. Haas, "Ideology and Alliances: British and French External Balancing Decisions in the 1930s," *Security Studies,* Vol. 12, No. 4, 2003, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410390447626; Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security,* Vol. 9, No. 4, 1985, https://doi.org/10.2307/2538540; John M. Owen, "When Do Ideologies Produce Alliances? The Holy Roman Empire, 1517-1555," *International Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 49, No. 1, 2005.

96 "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy." Department of Defense, 2018. https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf.
"National Security Strategy." The White House, October 14, 2022. https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf.

97 Nicholas Lardy, *The State Strikes Back: The End of Economic Reform in China?* Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2019; Jude Blanchette, "From "China Inc." to "CCP Inc.": A new paradigm for Chinese state capitalism," *China Leadership Monitor*, December 2020, https://www.prcleader.org/post/from-china-inc-to-ccp-inc-a-new-paradigm-for-chinese-state-capitalism; Elizabeth Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jingping and the New Chinese State,* (Oxford, U.K: Oxford University Press, 2018).

98 Andrei Kolesnikov, "Why Soviet Style Military Spending – and State Intervention – Won't Save Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, July 10, 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/putins-new-war-economy.

99 Suzanne Maloney, *Iran's Political Economy Since the Revolution*, (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Tat Yong Kang, "The Political Obstacles to Economic Reform in North Korea: The Ultra Cautious Strategy in Comparative Perspective," *The Pacific Review,* Vol. 27, No. 1, 2013, doi:10.1080/09512748.2013.846933.

100 See *Jurgen Kuhling, Philipp Reinhold, and Thomas Weck. "State Capitalism and Level Playing Field: The Need for a 'Third-Country State Aid Instrument' to Restore a Level Playing Field in the EU's Internal Market." European State Aid Law Quarterly 19, no. 4 (2020): 403–17* for an example of how market economies will struggle to develop strong relations with command economies because the command economy heavily supports its enterprises.

101 Toke S, Aidt and Martin Gassebner, "Do Autocratic States Trade Less?" World Trade Organization, November 2008, https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/reser_e/gtdw_e/wkshop08_e/gassebner_e.pdf ; Arup Banerji and Hafez Ghanem, "Does the Type of Political Regime Matter for Trade and Labor Market Policies?," The World Bank Economic Review 11, no. 1 (1997): 171–94.; Edward D. Mansfield, Helen V. Milner, and B. Peter Rosendorff, "Free to Trade: Democracies, Autocracies, and International Trade," The American Political Science Review 94, no. 2 (2000): 305–21, https://doi.org/10.2307/2586014.

102 Christopher S. Chivvis and Beatrix Geaghan-Breiner, *Emerging Powers and the Future of American Statecraft,* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/04/emerging-powers-and-the-future-of-american-statecraft?lang=en.

103 Alastair Iain Johnston; China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations. *International Security* 2019; 44 (2): 9–60. doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00360.
Mazarr, Michael, Timothy Heath, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos. "China and the International Order." RAND Corporation, 2018. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2400/RR2423/RAND_RR2423.pdf.

104 Matthew Kroenig, "The Autocratic Advantage?" In *The Return of Great Power Rivalry: Democracy versus Autocracy from the Ancient World to the U.S. and China*, edited by Matthew Kroenig. Oxford University Press, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190080242.003.0003.

105 Michaela Mattes and Mariana Rodríguez, "Autocracies and International Cooperation," International Studies Quarterly, Vol. 58, No. 3, 2014, https://doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12107.

106 "China Trade Balance, Exports and Imports." World Integrated Trade Solution, 2021. https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/CHN/Year/2021/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/Partner/all#.

107 Stephen M. Walt, "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse," *Survival,* Vol. 39, No. 1, 1997.

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

In a complex, changing, and increasingly contested world, the Carnegie Endowment generates strategic ideas, supports diplomacy, and trains the next generation of international scholar-practitioners to help countries and institutions take on the most difficult global problems and advance peace. With a global network of more than 170 scholars across twenty countries, Carnegie is renowned for its independent analysis of major global problems and understanding of regional contexts.

American Statecraft Program

The American Statecraft Program develops and advances ideas for a more disciplined U.S. foreign policy aligned with American values and cognizant of the limits of American power in a more competitive world.

CarnegieEndowment.org